SALTON SEA ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING

April 27 2004
9:30 – 3:30
Holtville

Meeting Summary

Department of Water Resources Director Lester Snow welcomed Advisory Committee members and led introductions of those present (list attached). He noted that much of the day's agenda focused on programs/activities relating to Salton Sea ecosystem restoration, particularly mitigation activities associated with the Quantification Settlement Agreement, in response to the Committee's questions at the March meeting. The Committee had previously heard presentations on past work of the Salton Sea Authority and status of the Lower Colorado River Multispecies Conservation Plan activities.

Andy Fecko of the State Water Resources Control Board gave an overview of the requirements contained in the Board's order (Order 2002-13) for the QSA water transfers from Imperial Irrigation District to San Diego County Water Authority and to Coachella Valley Water District. IID must provide SWRCB with an annual report summarizing quantities of water transferred to SDCWA and CVWD and used for mitigation, and must report on the status of other mitigation measures implemented. Order 2002-13 was modified at IID's request in January 2004, to provide an alternative strategy for managing Salton Sea salinity in the first 15 years of the water transfers. Under the alternative strategy, IID uses land fallowing to generate replacement water for the sea in amounts equal to those lost to the sea through out-of- basin transfers for the 15-year period. Other required mitigation measures include carrying out habitat conservation strategies for razorback sucker, tamarisk scrub, drain habitat, and desert pupfish, and implementing an air quality mitigation and monitoring plan. The latter plan, to be implemented as shorelines recede due to the water transfers, entails restricting access to exposed shorelines, carrying out research and monitoring, purchasing offsetting emissions credits, and directly reducing emissions.

Dave Fogerson of SDCWA described the role of the QSA Joint Powers Authority, which was established through the QSA agreements and the implementing legislation to administer QSA mitigation funding. The Department of Fish and Game chairs the JPA; its other members are IID, CVWD, and SDCWA. By statute, the three water agencies are to pay up to $133 million for mitigation of QSA water transfers; mitigation costs in excess of that amount become the State's responsibility. The mitigation projects are outlined in the Environmental Cost-Sharing, Funding, and Habitat Conservation Plan Development Agreement. They include an estimated $83 million for compliance with federal and state Endangered Species Acts, state fully protected species statutes and natural community conservation planning, and the California Environmental Quality Act.

Another $50 million is for the make-up water for the Salton Sea required by the SWRCB. The JPA collects and disburses funds for the mitigation projects. The water agencies themselves, not the JPA, perform actual implementation of the mitigation projects. IID will be implementing most of the projects.

Kim Nicol of DFG summarized the process of preparing a natural community conservation plan. The ECSFHCPD Agreement provides that IID, CVWD, and SDCWA are to use their best efforts to cause DFG and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to approve an HCP/NCCP and related permits prior to December 31, 2006. The state legislation establishing the NCCP process was enacted in 1991; NCCPs are intended to complement the ESA/HCP process. Most of the initial impetus for NCCP preparation occurred in Southern California, because of the area's increasing urban development. In response to a question on the timeframe needed to complete an NCCP, including the public participation process, Kim replied that 18 months was the absolute minimum, but five to ten years would be more typical. It was mentioned that the Coachella Valley multispecies conservation plan/NCCP (covering urban development in the upper part of the valley) has been in preparation for about 10 years. Presently, the QSA NCCP applicants (the three water agencies) are scheduling their first meeting with DFG. Kim also noted that the QSA NCCP only covers actions at the Salton Sea – it does not cover transfer mitigation actions on the Lower Colorado River.

Sheila Ault and Jose Angel of the Colorado River Basin Regional Water Quality Control Board and Al Kalin and Nicole Rothfleisch of the Imperial County Farm Bureau covered the status of total maximum daily load implementation for the Salton Sea watershed. The Clean Water Act requires states to identify and prioritize impaired waterbodies, and then to develop TMDLs for them. The RWQCB has developed, and EPA has approved, TMDLs for pathogens in the New River and silt in the New and Alamo Rivers. The RWQCB is developing TMDLs for silt in Imperial Valley agricultural drains; trash, volatile organic compounds, and dissolved oxygen in the New River; nutrients in the Salton Sea; and pathogens in the Coachella Valley Stormwater Channel (lower Whitewater River). Implementation of the rivers' silt TMDLs relies heavily on a voluntary program of grower best management practices coordinated through the ICFB. A high rate of voluntary compliance has been achieved. BMPs include actions designed to slow the flow of water in the drain system and to reduce erosion of soil into the drains. It was asked if the RWQCB was working on a selenium TMDL – the RWQCB is not. Selenium would be too difficult for growers to control practically – source control measures should instead be implemented in the upper Colorado River Basin where the selenium originates.

Peter von Haam of the Attorney General's Office provided a summary and status of pending cases relating to QSA implementation. IID filed a validation action on the QSA and related agreements. Imperial County and the South Coast Air Quality Management District filed CEQA challenges against SWRCB for its Order 2002-13 approving the QSA water transfers. Imperial County and other plaintiffs filed CEQA and other challenges against various QSA parties. Venue of most of the cases is, or has been transferred to, Sacramento. A hearing is pending on a motion to coordinate those

cases. Lester Snow noted that the number of CEQA challenges filed against the QSA highlighted the need for the State to fully and carefully comply with CEQA requirements.

In the ensuing discussion about activities with some relationship to Salton Sea ecosystem restoration, it was mentioned that other activities should also be added to the matrix provided as a summary handout to the Committee. These activities would include the Torres-Martinez proposed wetland project at the north end of the sea, Cocopah Tribe proposed cross-border project, International Boundary and Water Commission flood control channel capacity project on the Lower Colorado River, and other IBWC activities.

Lester Snow directed the Committee's attention to the meeting handout on the Advisory Committee's role and its sample questions about ecosystem restoration goals, and encouraged the members to discuss the goals. He also asked members to e-mail their comments by the end of May. Some of the points brought out included:

► As mentioned at previous meetings, we should call this effort ecosystem rehabilitation, rather than restoration.

► There are several environmental planning processes all starting at the same time – Salton Sea restoration, NCCP preparation, QSA mitigation, etc – who's on first?

► External factors that will affect the long-term sustainability of the sea need to be considered. These include changed inflows due to changes in Imperial Valley cropping patterns or drought.

► Alternatives need to have sufficient adaptability to respond to changing conditions.

► Selenium loading to the sea must be considered.

► A technical committee or similar forum should be created to provide coordination on environmental activities encompassed within various aspects of QSA implementation. We should make most cost-effective use of available funding.

► The urbanized part of the Coachella Valley is developing very rapidly. In the context of the Coachella Valley MSCP/NCCP, it is important to move quickly to preserve needed lands as open space.

► Recreation and local economic development should be addressed as part of alternative formulation and evaluation.

To help Committee members focus on ecosystem restoration goals and objectives, two presentations were provided on lessons learned in the Central Valley and Bay-Delta. Dr. Randy Brown covered experiences in the Bay-Delta and CALFED programs. He emphasized the desirability of good long-term monitoring data, and full disclosure of the metadata associated with monitoring. Adaptive management is important, especially in

an ecosystem like the Bay-Delta where introduced species have completely changed the characteristics of the ecosystem. Ecosystem restoration projects are expensive, and proposed actions must be flexible enough (be capable of being phased) to respond to variable availability of funds.

Carroll Hamon, a former DWR Deputy Director and manager of the state-federal Inter-Agency San Joaquin Valley Drainage Program, described DWR's and USBR's efforts in dealing with large volumes of saline agricultural drainage water in a closed basin setting, accompanied by selenium management issues. The program initially considered a master project exporting saline drain water out of the valley to ocean disposal – either to the San Francisco Bay or to Monterey Bay. Those approaches were rejected due to their costs and political and environmental obstacles. The program went through a period of expensive research and pilot testing of salt removal and selenium treatment technologies, eventually dropping that approach upon determining that no treatment technologies would be cost-effective for the volume of water to be managed. Since 1990 the program has been addressing individual components of the drainage problem, such as land retirement to reduce drainage volumes and on-farm evaporation ponds operated to limit bird exposure to selenium. The former Kesterson Reservoir was closed as a landfill at a cost of about $30 million, to prevent further wildlife exposure to selenium, and substitute water supplies and habitat were provide for the waterfowl. The Central Valley RWQCB requires measures such as bird hazing at operating evaporation ponds, to reduce bird exposure to drain water containing selenium.

Carol Roberts of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service provided background information on the desert pupfish, the only native fish species in the Salton Sea ecosystem. The pupfish has been listed as endangered under both the federal and state ESAs. Predation/competition by introduced fish species is believed to be a reason for the population decline. Pupfish, which feed on detritus and algae, can survive salinities of up to 70 g/l. Pupfish occur in sea tributaries (Salt and San Felipe Creeks), in the irrigation drainage system, and in shallow near-shore areas of the sea. Connectivity between drain/creek habitat and the sea is believed to be important to maintain the population.

Tom Kirk of the Salton Sea Authority gave an overview of the conceptual preferred alternative that the SSA Board adopted this week. The concept will be undergoing further engineering and environmental review; no CEQA compliance has been completed for it. A draft report is available on the SSA's web site. The new preferred concept is similar to the SSA's previously adopted north lake alternative, with an embankment dividing the present sea area to create a north lake. Reasons for maintaining a lake at the north rather than the south end of the present sea include the small communities and Torres-Martinez Reservation located at the north end. In addition to salt disposal areas and wetlands, the south end could have recreational feature such as golf courses, campgrounds, or off-highway vehicle areas. The north end could have economic development features such as hotels or condominiums.

Next Meeting

June 8th – Sacramento

ATTENDANCE

Advisory Committee Members or Alternates Present

Linden Anderson, Riverside County Farm Bureau
Steve Birdsall, Imperial County Air Pollution Control District
Fred Cagle, Sierra Club
Celeste Cantu, State Water Resources Control Board
Michael Cohen, Pacific Institute
Dan Cooper, California Audubon
Kim Delfino, Defenders of Wildlife
Bill DuBois, California Farm Bureau Federation
Bill Gaines, California Waterfowl Association
Lori Gray, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation
Bob Ham, Imperial Valley Association of Governments
Rick Hoffman, Riverside County
Al Kalin, Imperial County Farm Bureau
Gary Johnson, Colorado River RWQCB
Mark Nichols, Cabazon Band of Mission Indians
Lisa Northrop, Bureau of Indian Affairs
Larry Purcell, San Diego County Water Authority
Tom Raftican, United Anglers of Southern California
Alberto Ramirez, Torres-Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indians
Mike Remington, Imperial Irrigation District
Steve Robbins, Coachella Valley Water District
Bernard Shanks, U.S. Geological Survey
Dennis Underwood, Metropolitan Water District of Southern California
Dan Walsworth, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
John Wohlmuth, Coachella Valley Association of Governments
Gary Wyatt, Imperial County